

NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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Critical Habitat Proposed For Canada Lynx

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service published today a proposed rule to designate critical habitat for the Federally threatened Canada lynx, in compliance with a court order. In total, approximately 26,935 square miles of land fall within the boundaries of the proposed critical habitat designation in portions of northern Maine, northeastern Minnesota, the northern Rocky Mountains (northwestern Montana and a small portion of northern Idaho), and the Okanogan area of the northern Cascades in north-central Washington.

The Canada lynx was listed in 2000 as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) throughout its range in the contiguous United States. The lynx currently lives in boreal forests in five geographic regions: the Northeast, the Great Lakes, the Northern Rocky Mountains, the Southern Rocky Mountains, and the Cascade Mountains. The Service is proposing to designate areas in four of these regions as critical habitat.

Areas proposed as critical habitat for the Canada lynx include boreal forest landscapes that provide beneficial habitat elements for the lynx, including snowshoe hares for prey and abundant large, woody debris piles that are used as dens. All proposed areas have recent verified records of lynx occurrence and reproduction and thus are considered occupied. The areas proposed for designation include:

Northeast:

Maine - approximately 10,633 square miles in portions of Aroostook, Franklin, Penobscot, Piscataquis and Somerset Counties;

Great Lakes:

Minnesota: approximately 3,546 square miles in portions of Cook, Koochiching, Lake, and St. Louis Counties

***Northern Rockies:**

(Montana and Idaho): approximately 10,760 square miles in portions of Boundary County, Idaho; and Flathead, Glacier, Granite, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Lincoln, Missoula, Pondera, Powell, and Teton Counties in Montana

***Cascades:**

Washington: approximately 1,996 square miles in portions of Chelan and Okanogan Counties

*Note: U.S. Forest Service lands in Idaho, Montana and Washington are not included in this proposal, although their area is reflected in the total number of square miles. Accurate estimates of these Federal lands were not readily available; however, the square mile totals will be corrected in the final designation.

“The Service is proposing only those areas considered to contribute to the conservation of the Canada lynx,” said Ralph Morgenweck, the Service’s Director of the Mountain-Prairie region. “To ensure that the final critical habitat designation is as accurate as possible, we encourage people to review our proposal and provide comments and any additional information they believe relevant. The Service will consider all available information before making a final decision.”

Public comments on the proposed rule will be accepted until February 7, 2006. The Service is particularly seeking input on whether lands in three additional areas, a) the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (Wyoming, Montana and Idaho), b) the “Kettle Range” in Ferry County, Washington and c) the Southern Rocky Mountains, are essential for the conservation of the species and the basis for why they might be essential. Written comments can be submitted via e-mail to FW6_lynx@fws.gov or mailed to Montana Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 100 N. Park Avenue, Suite 320, Helena, Montana 59601.

Oral and written comments will also be accepted at the following scheduled public hearings:

Minnesota

Wednesday, December 7, 2005, from 7:30 to 9:00 PM at The Inn on Lake Superior, 350 Canal Park Drive, Duluth, Minnesota. The hearing will be preceded by an informational session from 6:00 to 7:30 PM.

Montana

Tuesday, January 10, 2006, from 6:00 to 8:00 PM at Westcoast Kalispell Center, 20 North Main Street, Kalispell, Montana. The hearing will be preceded by an informational session from 4:30 to 6:00 PM.

Maine

Wednesday, December 14, 2005, from 8:00 to 9:00 PM at the Black Bear Inn and Conference Center, 4 Godfrey Drive, Orono, Maine. The hearing will be preceded by an informational session from 7:00 to 8:00 PM.

Washington

Wednesday, January 18, 2006, from 7:00 to 8:30 PM at Methow Valley Community Center, 201 South Methow Valley, Hwy 20, Twisp, Washington. The hearing will be preceded by an informational session from 5:00 to 6:30 PM.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management or protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands. Federal agencies are required to consult with the Service on actions they carry out, fund or authorize that might affect critical habitat.

Several areas that were identified as contributing to the conservation of the species are not included from the proposed designation because they are covered by provisions in the Lynx Conservation and Assessment Strategy (LCAS), which was developed by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The LCAS uses the best scientific information available to provide a consistent and effective approach to conserve lynx. Lands managed by the LCAS do not need special management or protection as they are already covered.

Areas not included in the proposed designation for this reason include portions of the Superior National Forest in northeastern Minnesota, the Bureau of Land Management Garnet Resource Area in the Northern Rockies (Montana), the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana, and the Bureau of Land Management Spokane District in the North Cascades in Washington.

In addition, Federal lands within seven National Forests in Idaho, Montana, and Washington are not included in the proposal because they are covered by the May 2005 Conservation Agreement which provides measures to reduce or eliminate risks to lynx and lynx habitat until long-term conservation plans are in place. Lands within the Flathead, Helena, Idaho Panhandle, Lewis and Clark, Lolo, Kootanai and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests are included in the estimated square miles of proposed habitat designation owing to difficulties in obtaining accurate estimates of the area of Federal land within each national forest boundary in a timely manner. This will be corrected in the final designation.

Some State and Federal lands included in the proposed designation are subject to management plans that are currently being revised to incorporate the LCAS or similar management and may be considered for exclusion from the final designation of critical habitat based on further analysis and public comment. Certain Tribal lands are also being considered for removal from the designation because of the potential for lynx conservation to be achieved off of Tribal lands. Additionally, the Service will evaluate the adequacy of existing management plans to conserve lynx on National Park Service lands.

Lynx are medium-sized cats, generally measuring 30-35 inches long and weighing 18-23 pounds. They have tufts on their ears, short, black-tipped tails, and large, well-furred feet and long legs for traversing snow. Lynx are highly specialized predators of snowshoe hare and are strongly associated with boreal forest habitat, which individual lynx require large portions of to support their home ranges.

The Service used the best scientific information to first determine which lands contribute to the conservation of the Canada lynx by defining the physical and biological features needed for lynx survival and reproduction in addition to analyzing verified records of lynx presence and breeding. Next, the designation was limited to lands that required special management.

The proposed rule was prepared pursuant to a court order resulting from a lawsuit filed against the Service by the Defenders of Wildlife and others. The court order requires the Service to propose critical habitat for the Canada lynx by November 1, 2005 and issue a final determination by November 1, 2006.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for listed species is also provided on many of the Service's National Wildlife Refuges and State wildlife management areas.

A copy of the proposed rule and other information about the Canada lynx is available on the Internet at <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/mammals/lynx> or by calling the Service's Montana Field Office at (406) 449-5225.

The Service is preparing a draft economic analysis of the proposed critical habitat that will be released for public review and comment at a later date.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries,

conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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